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RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0157
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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2142
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RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7283
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SUBJECT: SCENE SETTER FOR COMMANDER, U.S. CENTCOM,S VISIT
TO UZBEKISTAN, 24 - 25 JANUARY 2008

Classified By: Ambassador Richard Norland for reasons 1.4(b) and 1.4(d)

1. (C) SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND. Embassy Tashkent welcomes the 24-25 January 2008 visit by the Commander of U.S. CENTCOM. This will be the first visit by a CENTCOM Commander to Uzbekistan in nearly three years since relations dissolved in the wake of the May 2005 Andijon events and the U.S. departure from Karshi-Khanabad Airbase in November 2005. Relations between the United States and Uzbekistan deteriorated even further after that point. However, in the past five months, there have been notable improvements in the relationship, especially in security sectors, as several branches of the Government of Uzbekistan (GoU) actively re-engaged with their U.S. counterparts.

2. (C) Human rights and governance issues remain. President Karimov and other senior officials say that they are ready to address specific issues but, to date, there is little to show. Meanwhile, in late December 2007, President Bush signed legislation that allows six months for progress on human rights before visa bans on senior GoU officials are considered. Embassy Tashkent believes that such a ban would stand a good chance of derailing our relationship including the improving security partnership.

3. (C) President Karimov and the presidential apparat run this tightly-controlled police state through the GoU's security and intelligence service, the National Security Service (NSS). Almost all GoU decisions are screened by the NSS and resolved at unusually high levels, including almost all decisions involving the United States. NSS influence within the GoU, especially MoD and the Border Guards, increased exponentially in the past three years, reflecting Karimov's fear of regime change.

4. (U) Tight control extends into the economy despite

Uzbekistan's great mineral, energy and agricultural wealth, low criminality, and an above average infrastructure in comparison to the rest of Central Asia and the other former Soviet republics. High-level corruption, over-regulation, high import duties, and limits on currency convertibility stifle the economy. Uzbekistan's GDP growth is positive, but only because of commodities sales and remittances by labor migrants in Russia and Kazakhstan and the United States. Recently, Uzbekistan received one of Transparency International's worst ratings for corruption, ranking 175th out of 180 countries in comparative levels of transparency. The GoU has increasingly indicated an awareness of the necessity for reforms, but, thus far, there is little progress to demonstrate.

15. (U) There is some U.S. investment in Uzbekistan. Proctor and Gamble, and Texaco manufacture products for regional consumption. General Motors recently took a minority share of the Daewoo plant near Andijon where GM is now assembling Chevrolets in addition to several Daewoo models.

16. (C) In respect to the U.S. - Uzbek relationship, there are some encouraging signs that President Karimov and the GoU are willing to progress in all areas of a more balanced relationship. As part of this new atmosphere, the GoU is anxious to host you and your team. Your visit comes at a critical time in this very modest, yet noteworthy, rapprochement.

RECENTLY IMPROVED RELATIONS

17. (C) The recent re-engagement between the GoU and the USG was reportedly initiated by President Karimov himself at a cabinet-level meeting, probably a GoU National Security Council (NSC) meeting, in late July 2007. At that meeting, Karimov instructed the security forces and power ministries to re-engage with the United States and emphasized that there are areas of mutual interest with the U.S. Oddly, this was at probably the lowest point in the bilateral relationship following the May 2007 detention and beating of an Embassy Tashkent foreign service national (FSN).

18. (C) The exact reasons for the change in GoU foreign policy behavior remain undetermined but probably have to do with a desire to avoid being too dependent on a resurgent Russia. There are signs that a recent Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) proposal concerning Afghanistan was opposed by the GoU. Although the GoU has been an enthusiastic supporter of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) trade and economic development initiatives, the GoU has been almost a non-participant in SCO military events. This is despite the fact that the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) is located in Tashkent. GoU officials often repeat their government's dislike of multi-lateral security arrangements and the GoU's preference on bilateral relations. The German airbase at Termez operates on a bilateral basis and never allowed NATO use. ISAF and NATO partners with rights to Termez use the facility as agreed to in separate bilateral arrangements.

19. (C) The GoU is also very concerned about the situation in Afghanistan and what the GoU calls "narco-aggression" coming both from Afghanistan and through Tajikistan. The GoU has expressed a very pessimistic view of developments in Afghanistan. Some of the pessimistic reporting comes from General Dostum's supporters and may be intended to influence the GoU concerning Afghanistan and President Karzai's government. Counter-narcotics and intelligence sharing on Afghanistan are two main areas of mutual interest where the GoU very much wants to work bilaterally with the USG and U.S. CENTCOM.

110. (C) The Uzbek MoD has thus far dutifully executed its part of the current military-to-military plan, including three Uzbek-hosted events and one event in the United States. Uzbek MoD also hosted two previously unscheduled CENTCOM

delegations, the first led by the Chief of CJ5-SCC, and the second led by the Deputy J5. On short notice, the GoU MoD changed its mind in September 2007 and sent a general officer to the U.S. Air Commanders' Conference in Washington D.C. The GoU is now sending some military officials to the Marshall Center under the bilateral U.S. - German arrangement.

¶11. (C) In mid-November 2007, the GoU approved a requested one-year extension to the existing commercial cargo over-flight protocol without re-negotiation. At the same time, the GoU also gave hints that it was interested in expanding the existing over-flight protocol. In December 2007, during a visit by the CENTCOM Deputy J5, the Minister of Defense himself seemingly offered the use of Termez Airbase for cargo and humanitarian flights transiting Uzbekistan with loads destined for Afghanistan. A week later, MoD favorably inquired what types of cargo U.S. TRANSCOM was interested in shipping across Uzbekistan by road and rail. MoD officials expressed an interest in negotiating a rail and road transit agreement for supplies to OEF. At present, over 60% of fuel headed to OEF transits Uzbekistan.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONTEXT

¶12. (C) Currently, the GoU is unusually interested in improving security relations with the United States. In time, the GoU may accept measures toward mutual progress in human rights and civil society in order to accommodate continued improvements to the GoU - USG security partnership. Your visit is an opportunity to test this dynamic. As reflected in recent U.S. legislation which threatens a visa ban in five months unless there is progress in human rights, the USG resists the GoU view that human rights can be compartmentalized from security and other issues.

¶13. (C) The USG is looking for tangible progress on the following issues:

- (U) Amnesty of high-profile political prisoners.
- (U) Prison access for the International Committee of the Red Cross and fuller engagement with the GOU on ICRC's 2004 report.
- (U) Registration of civil society NGOs and more media freedom.

¶14. (C) In response to your request to meet with members of civil society, Embassy Tashkent has arranged a meeting between you and the local representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross. This meeting will occur at the U.S. Embassy. Meanwhile, Mrs. Fallon will meet with the GoU Ombudsman for Human Rights in the company of the Country Director for Open Dialogue Project, an NGO linked to Eastern Kentucky University and funded by USAID.

MILITARY COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES

¶15. (U) Embassy understands that there are several areas of possible military-to-military cooperation with the GoU, subject to U.S. interagency agreement.

- (1) (U) Negotiating an agreement with TRANSCOM for road, rail and air transit across Uzbekistan to Afghanistan and other CENTCOM partner countries.
- (2) (U) Developing a counter-narcotics program between the GoU and CENTCOM.
- (3) (C) Renewing the bilateral military intelligence exchange concerning Afghanistan. (This is a subject recently broached by GoU MFA.)
- (4) (U) Reestablishing a GoU defense attache position at the Uzbek Embassy in Washington D.C.

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